



United Way
of Southeastern Connecticut

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School Meals for All CT Testimony

February 23, 2023

Appropriations Committee

HB 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefore. (Elementary and Secondary Education Agencies)

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio, and all the distinguished members of the committee. My name is Dina Sears-Graves, and I am the President & CEO of United Way of Southeastern Connecticut (UWSECT) and I am here today to speak on **HB 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefore. (Elementary and Secondary Education Agencies)**.

I support this legislation because thirty-eight percent of families across Connecticut struggle to make ends meet. According to the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) report, a family of 4 in Connecticut needs to make \$90,660 to just afford basic needs. Connecticut's high cost of living, which is significantly impacted by high housing and childcare costs, affects the ability for families to pay for food. Even those who were managing to get by are now finding it difficult to make ends meet as the price of food, gas and oil have increased due to inflation. In addition to not being able to afford basic needs, food insecurity increases the risk of chronic illnesses, medical issues, hospitalizations, and medical costs. Progress was made by extending the no cost school meals until the end of the school year but at the end of this school year, the need is not going to go away. Therefore, a permanent solution is needed.

UWSECT is committed to ensuring families in Connecticut have access to food. UWSECT manages a food bank located in New London County (Gemma E. Moran United Way/Labor Food Center) that distributes over 2 million pounds of food across the county and we see the struggles firsthand of those every day who work but still do not make enough to ensure their children are food secure. UWSECT also financially supports a network of programs that support families across the region. Needs in our community are not going down, they are increasing, and food is often sacrificed as a result. When families have their basic needs met, parents feel confident that their children are eating, which helps reduce their risk for mental health challenges like depression and anxiety. No-cost schools meals will help families who have increased food costs and it will also ensure students can get a nutritional meal every day. Studies show that when schools serve no-cost meals for all, there is less absenteeism, more focus, and students feel safer in the cafeteria. No-cost school meals not only support child learning and nutrition, but reduces stigmas in meal-serving patterns, lessens the administrative burden on school food service staff, and relieves financial stress for families.

I urge you to pass legislation to equitably feed our kids in school by establishing a permanent no cost meal program. No child should go hungry or not get the much needed nutrition their growing bodies need to develop and learn.

Thank you.

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